

## *Is Christianity Credible?*

**James I. Packer**

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### I

In the same way that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so questions sound different in different ears, according to what each hearer brings to them. When the Editor asked me for a contribution to the 'Is Christianity credible?' series, he almost apologized that the question sounded defeatist and reductionist.\* But to me it did not sound like that at all; it came, rather, as a welcome opportunity to say two things which in these days I find myself wanting to shout from the housetops. The first thing is that the intellectual credentials of thorough-going Christianity are very strong, much stronger than is often allowed, and it is only when Christians cease to be thorough-going that their faith ever sounds or looks forlorn. When it feels forlorn and dubious (and I suppose all Christians know such feelings on occasion), it is because, for whatever reason, relevant facts are not making their proper impact. The second thing is that if thorough-going Christianity be thought incredible, it is a case of pots calling the kettle black, for the rival convictional systems which present themselves are less credible still. Scepticism, solipsism and nihilism, being philosophies of ultimate negation, cannot be refuted in the ordinary way, but can yet be shown to be paradoxical and unnecessary, while affirmations of alternative absolutes, Marxist, humanist, Freudian or whatever prove on inspection to be inadequate to fit all the facts.

What I mean by 'thorough-going' I will try to say in a moment, but let me

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first state my conviction that the difficulties which much contemporary Protestantism finds in commending Christianity as a believable option for men today springs directly from the way in which, following in the methodological footsteps of Schleiermacher, we habitually scale Christianity down so as to represent it to its cultured despisers as the fulfilment of their own best thoughts, instincts and longings. Scaled-down Christianities are both the fruit and the root of uncertainty, and the supposition that the less we commit ourselves to maintain the easier it will be to maintain it never proves true. To be sure, Schleiermacher did not see himself as reducing Christianity, but rather as interpreting and indeed rejuvenating it in the cultural milieu of his time; reduce it, however, he did by the anti-transcendent, anti-revelationary, anti-Trinitarian thrust of his phenomenalist method of theologizing, and the problem with both him and his spiritual descendants is that their reduced creeds (for each has his own) seem arbitrary to a degree. In every case the question presses: why, if this man believes so much, does he not believe more? but if he believes so little, why does he not believe less? Thinkers in this tradition who, like Schleiermacher himself, have not been muddle-headed (and there have been many such, whose mental rigour merits deepest respect—Ritschl, Harnack, Troeltsch, Wiles for starters) might well seek to parry the pincers effect of this double question by saying that what determined their conclusions was strict application of their method. But since each man's method is his personal mix of phenomenism (learning what Christianity is by inspecting it as a human phenomenon) and positivism (sieving the witness to Christian origins through the meshes of a uniformitarian world-view), the problem of arbitrariness comes up again at a deeper level, where it is not so

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\* (What I said was, 'You may think the question smacks of reductionism'. I surmised wrongly — Ed.)

easily banished; for why embrace such methods in any form, when the revelation-claim that is integral to biblical religion points a different way? Stimulating notions and insights have certainly sprung from surveying Christianity by the light of Schleiermacherian methods, but the inescapable plurality of them has spawned so wide a range of diverse beliefs about Christian essentials (God, Jesus Christ, salvation) as to make anyone who wants to communicate Christianity to the wider world feel completely stymied. Looked at from this standpoint, the Schleiermacherian tradition of theological subjectivity has much to answer for.

It was, perhaps, no wonder that Karl Barth, in his zeal to speak the word of God and the reactionary passion of his love-hate relationship with Schleiermacher, not only refused to scale down what he took to be the biblical faith but rejected the whole apologetic enterprise of showing faith reasonable and unbelief unreasonable as a misguided exercise which leads only to truncated Christianities pandering to unbelievers' intellectual conceit and unable to follow Paul in diagnosing the world's wisdom as folly (1 Cor. 1-2). Barth's emphasis was timely and invigorating in the academic theological world of the twenties and thirties, where Kant's ghost still walked and the unholy league between idealist philosophy ('the rational is the real') and liberal theology ('what is real in Christianity is rational') still stood in older men's minds; had Barth not taken this line, the recovery of confidence in the biblical message which he sought to midwife might never have come to birth. But in the long term to have no apologetic—that is, no 'natural' or, as John Macquarrie urges us to say, 'philosophical' theology which roots the

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God-referring language and the God-affirming content of Christian faith in the world of everyday reality—makes against credibility no less than does the solvent effect of Schleiermacherian subjectivism. Paul van Buren's switch from Barthianism, allegedly revelation-based but epistemologically uncertain, to the linguistic relativism, indeed scepticism, of *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* is a cautionary tale showing what sort of recoil methodological contempt for philosophical theology may prompt. Such contempt cannot establish credibility; rather the reverse.

## II

What, then, will confirm credibility? By what tests can a faith like Christianity, a total world-and-life view, be shown to be believable? Four tests, at least, are relevant.

First comes the test of *historical objectivity*. Christianity in all its forms claims to be a faith based on historical events. It will not, therefore, be credible unless its factual historical assertions are based on cogent evidence, and not significantly undermined by contrary evidence. For two centuries now much Western Protestant thinking about Christian origins has been shaped by the uniformitarian *a priori* wished on it in the name of Newton, plus the Romantic stress on the decisiveness of personal factors when men reconstruct and interpret the past, and it has become almost a shibboleth to say that everything important concerning Christian origins is shrouded in deep uncertainty. If that is just a way of saying that there is always some scholar around who will challenge his colleagues' claims, let the statement stand, for it is true; but if what is meant is that, this being so, nobody is entitled to be certain about Christian origins, I for one must demur. By 'cogent' evidence I mean evidence of the flow of events which prompts the conclusion (of the Sinai covenant-making, or Elijah's triumph at Carmel, or Jesus' bodily resurrection, or Paul's conversion, to take a selection of

key items', 'however strange and mysterious, it must have happened, for what followed is inexplicable without it'. Without denying for a moment the findings of modern historiographical analysis about the complexity of historical judgments and the variety of cultural and presuppositional factors that enter into them, I wish to record my conviction that cogent evidence of this kind is in fact available to us, and supremely so in connection with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Second comes the test of *rational coherence*. Christianity in all its forms says that God the creator transcends man's understanding, but insists in the same breath that what we know about him through revelation makes good sense. For credibility, substance must be given to this claim. So the various assertions made—historical, convictional and interpretative of present realities under God—must demonstrably hang together as a meaningful, workable and wise philosophy of life. Also, the logic of, and rules for, our speech about the incomprehensible creator must be clearly explicable, as must our speech about human decision and action, which Christianity sees as both free *and* controlled, self-determined *and* overruled at the same time. These are the two areas where Christianity's logical coherence is, and in fact has always been, most suspect. Down the centuries, however, Christian spokesmen have set themselves to make evident the coherence that is

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claimed, and I judge that where Christianity is consistently formulated the job can still be done.

Third comes the test of *explanatory power*. As the higher can explain the lower, and the more complex the simple, but not vice versa, so one test for any position claiming, as all forms of Christianity do, to embody final truth about life is its power to account for actual human behaviour and states of mind, including denial or disregard of its own claims, and preference for other options. Also, it must give good answers to man's inescapable questions about life's meaning, purpose and value, including the question of what death means, both others' death and our own, and whether the certainty of death does not render life senseless—the question with which Woody Allen, surely the shrewdest and most serious comedian of our time, as well as the funniest, is confessedly preoccupied. I would maintain that consistent Christianity, with its radical doctrines of this life as a preparation for the next, and of sin as touching the mind no less than the heart, and of the working of God's wrath and grace side by side in our fallen world, does not lack credibility here either.

Fourth comes the test of *individual experience* in relation to the expectations which Christian claims raise—perhaps the most sensitive area of evaluation today. All versions of Christianity claim that personal knowledge of God through Jesus Christ is life-transforming: for men in Christ are new creatures, and response to the gospel fulfils human nature in such a sense as to transmute realistic acceptance of what comes (to which the only alternatives are fantasy and suicide) from stoical endurance into a life of love and happiness. On this basis, Christianity claims to be the truest humanism, by comparison with which godless prescriptions for living do not merit that name at all. Such claims invite and indeed require inspection of Christianity's track record over two millennia, and their credibility will depend in measure on the credibility of Christians past and present. But the biblical call to witness, and the old truth that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, make the inspection appropriate from every standpoint. When someone like Don Cupitt concludes that incarnational faith must be queried because its moral effects have been so largely bad, we may disagree with his judgment on the

facts, but on the relevance of his appeal to them there can be no argument. Nor, surely, has a faith adorned by men like Origen, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross, Luther, Baxter, Wesley, John Newton, Hudson Taylor, George Muller, Sundar Singh, Charles de Foucauld and C. S. Lewis, plus countless lesser lights whose lives Christ has made new for all to see, anything to fear from this appeal. Nor (to anticipate an objection) are bad Christians a significant counterweight in this assessment; that men can profess Christianity without being transformed by it is not disputed; the question is, whether faith in Jesus Christ when taken seriously has a moral and spiritual transforming effect which is characteristic of it and is not naturally explicable in naturalistic terms. The devoted love of God and men, expressed in what might seem extravagances of prayer and service, in such lives as those cited seems to show quite decisively that it does, however many profess faith while their lives and characters remain unchanged.

It should be added that the full force of Christianity's capacity to pass each of these tests will be felt only when related to its capacity to pass the other

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three also. The significance of these criteria of credibility is cumulative. If Christianity showed up badly in relation to any one of them, its credibility would remain uncertain, no matter how adequately it met the other three. But if, as I believe, it passes all four tests impressively, its overall credibility is established beyond doubt.

### III

Now the question I begged when speaking of 'consistent' and 'thorough-going' Christianity must be faced. That I have in mind a particular understanding of essential Christianity which in my view passes the credibility test better than its rivals must by now be obvious; that I hold to it because of its supposedly superior apologetic strength (in other words, on grounds less rational than rationalistic) is a suspicion to which I may have laid myself open. So I turn to ask what procedures and criteria should decide for us what is an adequate account of authentic Christianity, where various accounts are canvassed and doctors disagree? At the risk of sounding old-fashioned and cavalier, I urge that the method which is in principle decisive is that which the 'biblical theology' movement of the past half-century has aimed to follow, the method sometimes described as reading the Bible from within. In its twentieth-century form it is a reaction against imposing on Scripture alien presuppositions, but in essence it is the method of much Patristic and all Reformation theology, updated for our times.

This method takes seriously the claims of biblical authors to be witnesses to and messengers from the living God of whom they speak. Intellectually, imaginatively and existentially it seeks to identify with their faith and to see reality through their eyes, not only because their meaning and thrust is otherwise likely to be missed, but also and basically because the truths about God which they voice and apply come from God himself and are the normative word through which he speaks to us here and now. Thus the method views the teachings of each biblical author as all Christians view the recorded sayings of Jesus Christ, and seeks to comprehend, relate and apply them in their character as divine instruction.

For various reasons this method is today under a cloud. It has been thought to be tied to Barth's biblical positivism and Christological hermeneutic (which, however, it would if followed consistently have amended). Some of its practitioners, by ignoring philosophical

theology, have made it seem that the method confines us to articulating biblical thoughts in biblical language of uncertain logical status. In stressing that God speaks in and through Scripture, they have appeared to minimize the cultural gap between the Bible world(s) and ours, leaving the impression that the method itself is intrinsically insensitive and naive at this point. We may query Dennis Nineham's belief that conceptual communication across a two- or three-millennia gap is not possible, but recent hermeneutical study has shown that getting into the mind of an Old Testament prophet or a first-century apostle is a very tricky business, and it is not clear that exponents of 'biblical theology' to date have sufficiently noted its complexity. As once James Barr convicted some of them of semantic naivety, so now they are suspected of cultural naivety, and also of theological naivety, for not having done justice to the conceptual pluralism (not, I think, pluralism of substance, though

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some today argue otherwise) of the biblical material. But these shortcomings can all be corrected—as rigour in applying the method requires that they should be—without any doubt being cast on the method itself.

Two of the conclusions to which this method leads may be stated here. The first is that acknowledgment of God as the self-revealed Triune creator and redeemer, and of Jesus Christ as our divine-human mediator and sin-bearer, risen, reigning and in due course returning, and of salvation as a new reconciled relationship with God in which the believer has been made a new creature in Christ by the Spirit, are basic and indispensable elements in any adequate account of Christianity; for these things—not as Bultmannian myths, but as revealed truths—are the core of New Testament Christian belief. The second conclusion is that the criterion whereby to test our own theological theories must be this: would the New Testament writers, were they here today, recognize these constructions as being in line with what they themselves said? This is just a way of articulating the old truth that we must test all things by the written word.

Thus the contents and boundaries of thorough-going Christianity may be discerned.

#### IV

One last word in this all-too-brief farrago. The question, 'is Christianity credible?' prompts the retort, 'Credible to whom?' If we are thinking of the person who does not yet believe, we should remind ourselves that in New Testament evangelism and exposition the Christian gospel is always presented as God's solution to our problem—the problem, that is, of our lostness, our separation from our maker through our sins—and the good news of the solution is preceded by the bad news of the divine rejection set forth in the Law under which we all naturally stand. In post-biblical Christian evangelism, whether by the apologists or Athanasius (*Contra Gentiles* and *De Incarnatione*) or Savonarola or Luther or Baxter or Whitefield or Wesley or Spurgeon or John Sung or Billy Graham, this pattern of exposition has regularly been followed, for it is observable that the dawning of a sense of personal spiritual need makes a vast difference to one's capacity to find the gospel believable. When at Corinth Paul resolved to stick to plain unvarnished proclamation of Christ crucified, 'not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God' (1 Cor. 2:4f.), it looks as if this was precisely his strategy; he looked to the Spirit to make folk realize that the needs of which he spoke were real for them, and the crucified Messiah whom he proclaimed was God's merciful provision

for them. We should not forget that through the Spirit there is self-evidencing, convincing force in the gospel, over and above the force of any arguments to confirm its credibility; and that the New Testament approach to the problem of human incredulity is not that the gospel needs to be changed from one generation to another so as to make it more believable, but that human beings in every generation need to be changed by the Holy Spirit so that they may be able to believe it as undoubtedly God's truth. So in seeking to commend Christianity as credible to unbelievers we should not stop short at going over the kind of

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thing covered in this essay; we should speak to them also, and very fully, of the spiritual predicament of mankind and the abiding problem of unforgiven, unmastered sin, and we should look to the Holy Spirit as we do so to work once more as he worked in Corinth long ago.

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